

[Ella Bartlett]

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STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER LOUISE G. BASSETT

ADDRESS BROOKFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

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SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT ELLA BARTLETT

ADDRESS BROOKFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

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Name: Louise G. Bassett

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Brookfield

Topic: Ella BartlettPaper 6

It was a cloudy afternoon with every hint of rain in the air when I stopped by to see Miss Bartlett. She had been sitting in the half-light doing the inevitable needlework and appeared more than glad to see a visitor. We sat and chatted, gradually drifting into "bygone" days.

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"Where did you go to school, Miss Ella?" I asked.

"Right here in Brookfield," she quickly replied.

"No, I mean in what school house did you learn your three 'R's'?"

"Oh, that, - why in th' school house almost opposite my old home, it still stands, [you?], pass it every time [you?] go cross th' river. They held school there up to 'bout ten years ago an' maybe [you?] don't think there was a row when th' school committee decided to close it for good. It should 've been done long before but th' Over th' River folks always made such a fuss th' school was kept goin' - no sense to it neither.

"Didn't [you?] ever notice that little school house? You haven't? That's funny, goodness, I don't see as how [you?] could miss it.

"It's a little sort of square house - paints not bad yet. Th' folks over there still give entertainments there - that's s'if [you?] can call 'em entertainments.

"It only has one room an' a entry where we hung our coats an' caps 'an tippets, up on little wooden pegs. Some of th' pupils would leave their lunch baskets or boxes out there. I lived so near I'd run home for my dinner, except once in a while mother would let me carry mine jest for fun.

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"Th' walls of th' room was plaster that was always whitewashed, they kept 'em lookin' pretty good, too.

"Say, honest, do [you?] really want to hear 'bout it? I don't want to bore [you?], but [you?] know I like to talk about it sometimes though, its nice to live it all over again once in a while."

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The wistfulness of her voice made me want to cry and I hastened to say - "Of course I want to hear about it, I want to hear all you can remember, tell me everything you feel like telling, I'd love it."

"Well, it was awful unattractive, that room, but I loved it. There was never but two pictures on th' walls, one of Washington an' one of Lincoln. Then later on one of th' teacher's brought a big map an' hung it back of her desk.

"There was a little platform an' th' teacher's desk stood on that an' they had a stiff backed chair to set in - like a kitchen chair - I guess it was a kitchen chair, at that.

"Th' teacher's desk always had books, copy books, an' ink an' pens an' pencils an' a globe. We used to love to twirl that globe around an' round when teacher wasn't lookin' or was out. They was always havin' to fix th' standard it was on.

"Course there was our desks - two had to set at one desk. Th' ones in th' back rows was supposed to be th' best 'cause th' model boys an' girls was put back there, for they behaved themselves an' didn't whisper at least it was thought they didn't. We used to say that it was mostly teacher's pets that got set there.

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"There was a big old stove that they burned wood in, one of th' boy's had to see that th' wood box that stood right beside th' stove, was kept full. Th' farmers of that district each brought their share of th' wood. They'd dump it in th' yard an' th' boys had to cut it up in pieces to fit th' stove. They never had to change that stove all th' years I went to school an' could that old stove heat up. Why, sometimes that room would be so hot we could hardly breath. Th' boy who kept th' wood box full got a dollar, I think it was, at th' end of each term.

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"There was a ventilator in th' ceilin' an' every now an' then some boy would have to crawl up an' open or shut it. It was supposed to have a string tied to it but it was always bein' yanked off.

"On one side of th' room was a blackboard an' under it was a bench so's th' little children could stand on it an' reach th' blackboard, an' on th' opposite side was another long narrow bench. Doesn't sound very attractive, does it?"

Without waiting for an answer, Ella Bartlett continued her musing. "We always had women for teachers 'cept once; he was young an' th' older girls was all crazy 'bout him an' thought he was awful good lookin'. His father was a farmer an' he'd sent this lad to some academy an' he was teachin' to save enough to go to Harvard.

"He was awful polite - goodness knows where he learned it - his folks wan't one bit. Anyway, he was an' when we saw him comin' an' we 4 was out playin' waitin' for school to begin, we'd, quick, run in an' when he come in he'd take off his cap an' say, 'Good mornin' children,' an' then we'd say, 'Good mornin,' sir,' an' then when school was out in th' afternoon, we'd get on our wraps an' come back in th' room an' say, 'Good afternoon, teacher,' an' th' girls would curtsy.

"One time, when school had let out, four or five of us was standin' by th' side of th' road an' a team come long an' though we didn't know th' folks we curtesied an' said, 'Good afternoon,' an' th' woman that was ridin' said, 'What nice manners you children have.' An' after that you couldn't keep us from curtesyin' every time we saw any folks.

"Some of our women teachers wan't as polite as he was but they was cheaper an' we learned 'bout's much - jest an' much; I guess, if th' truth was told. Th' girls was all for havin' men teachers though - but they didn't get 'em.

"Lookin' back at it now, I wonder how some of those poor women could have taught us anythin'. They always boarded at some farmer's house, paid 'bout two dollars a week

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board. They was paid five or six dollars for teachin' I remember hearin' my mother say. They mostly had to sleep in a room with one or two others - sometimes three - Of course, th' houses was big in those days but [you?] got to remember, so was the families.

"Another thing I remember her sayin' was that she knew they must all hate pork 'cause a kid'd come to school an' say, 'Ma wants you to come to dinner ' cause Pa's jest killed a pig.' They was always 5 always asked when 'Pa had jest killed a pig'.

"When I first started there wan't a clock in th' school house. Th' teacher had an hour glass - think of that - AN HOUR GLASS - Then one day we walked in an' found that my uncle Fred had give th' school a clock to hang on th' wall. We was all to excited to do much work that morning.

"School started at nine, or about then. It wasn't a crime to be late those days like it is now. You see children walked to school - sometimes near two miles - except in awful deep snow weather, then some farmer would have his ox sled started out an' he'd collect all th' children along th' way. There'd be two, three men on th' sled 'cause lots of times snowdrifts would have to be shovelled away.

"They'd get to school with th' sled all full of children, all shoutin' an' calling. Pretty soon another sled, from another direction filled with children would come. School would be real short those days, 'cause we couldn't play out much an' th' folks would want to come early to take th' children home before it come dark. I always felt bad that we lived so near th' school - I missed bein' on those rides.

"Th' children used to always walk unless th' roads had to be broken out but they hardly missed a day durin' th' winter. Th' children, today, think the're killed if they have to walk six blocks.

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"Well as I was sayin', school begun around nine o'clock. Some one was delegated to ring a big dinner bell out th' door an' then we'd tumble in an' get our coats off 'n set down. Then th' teacher'd read some of th' Bible an' give a prayer. Not long after I started it was changed, a chapter was taken in th' testament an' th' pupils who could read would each read two verses as long as th' chapter lasted an' then we'd all recite th' Lord's Prayer. We didn't have flag salutin' those days. Then out'd come our books an' we'd go at it.

"Th' A.B.C. class would be th' first to get up - then th' First Reader, then th' Second Reader an' all like that. Th' teacher had a little bell she'd ring to show each class was through an' then she'd ring again to show th' time had come for th' next class to do their best - or worst.

"We studied spellin' an' [arithmetic?] Arithmetic an' history an' when we got old enough, geography. We used to always count on our fingers an' in summer when some went barefoot you could see toes movin' when we was doin' sums an' you'd knew they was countin' with their toes, too.

"Most everybody had a slate an' if you was real lucky, maybe you had a double one. We'd have a bottle of soapsuds an' a [rag?] to clean th' slates with. We used to put bits of colored paper in th' soapsuds an' make 'em blue or red.

"At first, I went to school six days a week, that is, we went 7 from Monday to Saturday noon. We didn't have any vacations 'cept between terms. We had three terms a year, the winter one begun right after Thanksgivin', that was twelve weeks, then th' spring an' fall terms had ten weeks a piece. Sometimes there was trouble gettin' a teacher an' we couldn't have any school for a little while. There want as many pupils in th' summer as in th' winter for th' boys, 'specially th' big ones had to help on th' farms.

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"Th' smallest children always had four recesses, two in th' mornin' an' two in th' afternoon. Th' big girls would have fifteen minutes 'bout 'leven o'clock an' then they'd come in an' th' boys would have fifteen minutes. We weren't let go together like they do now.

"Oh, yes, I've forgot to tell [you?] 'bout our drinkin' water. Two boys would go across th' road to a well over there an' they'd bring back a big pail full pailful of water. It was set down on one end of th' long bench an' every now an' then some one would pass th' pail around th' school so's we could all get a drink. We'd drink even if it killed us, anythin' to take time from lessons. We had a dipper or a tin cup we drunk. "

I tried to get a question in but before I could say Jack Robinson Miss Ella was off again.

"You know, all th' teachers had a ruler, that they'd use when some of th' scholars was bad. She'd make 'em hold out their hands an' then she'd whack 'em. Some of 'em would yell 'till you could hear 'em a mile away an' then some other boys would jest laugh, you know to show off.

"I've seen a teacher get so mad she'd throw a ruler as quick as a wink, right at a boy an' mostly nobody could blame her. Then, sometimes, when two boys would be whisperin', th' teacher would sneak up behind 'em an' knock their heads together before they knew what had happened. Another punishment was to make you stand in th' corner with your back to th' school - or stand on one leg - or hold out your arm - straight out - it hurts like th' dickens after you've done it a while.

"Course th' dunce cap was used a long time - only it was stopped before I left school. I always thought it was silly. One thing we all dreaded was to have to set with a boy - or a girl. We always felt foolish an' guilty - though, maybe we wan't th' one to blame. Then there was havin' your ears boxed, an' oh, yes, we hated this, too - when a girl an' boy had been caught whispering to have a teacher put you up by her desk, an' make th' girl put on th' boys hat an' th' boy put on th' girl's sunbonnet. My - that was awful.

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"A thing that used to be hard on th' boys, was to have th' teacher take away their jackknife, sometimes, she'd have as many as 9 a dozen in her desk.

"I know now we didn't learn much, but I'll say this for our teachers most of 'em was real serious an' tried hard to teach us. We had one or two what was careless but th' children would go home an' report things an' th' parents would tell th' school committeemen who was always on th' job an' a no good teacher didn't last more'n a term.

"There was about twenty five or thirty pupils most of th' time. There was only two or three boys who ever went further then our country school an' I don't remember one girl goin' away.

"My parents wanted me to go to an academy in New York but I was a fraidy cat. I didn't want to go away from home - it was silly of me - an' yet - maybe not — I don't know.

"As I look at it now, I come to realize how little envy an' jealousy there was in that little school house. If a girl had anythin' new - a dress or a ribbon or new shoes, we would all get around her an' look an' sometimes feel th' goods an' admire but we weren't jealous."

"How did you dress when you went to school? Not like the children do now." I rushed my question before she could draw a breath.

"Wha-a-a-t—like they do now? Well, I guess not, we put on some clothes. We wore [stockin's?] not these socks thing like they do today. Goodness knows our shoes weren't fine but neither was they these flat 10 ugly, ungainly things they put on their feet today. Myself I think th' girls today look awful - jest awful.

"We used to dress real cute. Our things was made of print -calico, or percale or gingham an' was made plain but honestly they was becomin' an' what a child should wear. No frills or fuss, but neat. An' we mostly had aprons an' lots of 'em were real fancy an' sweet with a lot of little ruffles of th' same material or embroidery.

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"That's somethin' you don't see today, embroidery, at least hardly ever an' it was real dressy an' helped a lot when it was put on a dress. We wore checks a lot an' later polka dots was all th' rage. Another thing our dresses were long enough to hide our knees an' didn't look as if they'd run out of goods.

"My stockin's was knit at home at first but not for long. We had quite some buttons on our things. We was always buttoned up th' back, sometimes we had hooks an' eyes - I don't jest know when snaps come in.

"In th' winter some of th' girls would wear a knitted hood or a little square made like a shawl an' in th' summer it was sunbonnet an' above all things - We didn't want to get tanned. These girls today - my land, they look like niggers, some of 'em.

"Th' boys want wan't so lucky about their clothes as th' girls, they mostly had suits made out of th' older folks things an' nothin' ever matched. That is, their pants would be made from one suit an' th' coat from another an' the vest another. It was surprisin' though how good th' mother 's could make clothes for th' boys out 'o old things.

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"Th' boys would only wear overcoats when it was awful cold. They'd wear a cap pulled down over their ears an' a tippet around their necks but nary a coat 'till they was forced.

"You know, we really had lots of happiness in those days. We'd go slidin' when there was a crust on th' snow. Most of our sleds was homemade an' could always hold three or four. They usually had hard wood runners but some of th' boys would have th' blacksmith put on iron runner. The sleds went faster with th' iron runners. Th' boy who owned th' sled would put two or three on th' sled. He always set in th' back to steer, an' then away we'd go.

"Th' scholars would go snowballin' or slidin' or make snow men or build forts. I remember one winter some of th' boys got mad at some of the other boys an' both crowds built a fort for themselves, great big ones, too, they were. An' then they made a lot of snowballs an'

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soaked 'em in water an' was gettin' ready for a real fight. I told my mother about it an' she told my father she thought he ought to do somethin' about it for some boy might get hurt bad.

"He kind-a pooh-hood it but she kept at him so, he told her he'd keep a eye out an' if they got real bad he'd see that they stopped. Lots of mothers was worried but th' night before th' fight, it come real warm an' it thawed an' th' forts was like a flood, almost, so that ended that feud.

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"We played 'fox an' geese' a lot in winter, too. In summer we played 'tag' an' hide an' seek' an' 'blind man's bluff' an' 'hull gull' an' 'odd an' even, an' some of th' girls would play ball with th' boys.

"There was a good sized field right by th' side of th' school yard an' it was jest dandy for playin' ball. Th' bats was usually a right shaped piece of wood got off th' wood pile an' th' ball was home made. It'd be made out of ravelin's from old stockin's all wound together solid an' then it'd be covered with some kind of skin.

"There was a little brook that run through th' fields - emptied in th' Quagboag Quaboag river - we used to get mud for our mud pies an' sail little boats an' take good sized empty nut shells an' put little colored homemade flags stand up in 'em an' put 'em in th' brook an' bet each other which one's boat would stand up th' longest.

"We used to play 'horse' a lot - out in th' road. We'd sometimes play half a hour before a team would come along. One of th' boys' mother had let him take a baby high chair an' th' judge would set in that. Each horse would have a driver of course. All us children carried string, lots of it in our pockets, for reins. Th' drivers would play they was in sulky's an' we'd get our horses all lined up like they did th' horses at th' fair an' then th' judge would pound on th' chair with a big stick an' yell "Go' an' go we did.

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"We played see-saw a lot, too. There was a high fence at th' back 13 of the school an' every now an' then a new one would have to be put up for th' boards of th' old one would be gradually pulled down for our see-saw.

"When I think how excited we'd get blowin' bubbles an' makin' a loud noise by blowin' up a bag an' then poppin' it, it doesn't seem true.

"I remember a boy who could crack his knuckles an' make a loud sound. It almost made me sick to hear it an' yet it fascinated me, too, an' I'd always hang around when he did it. He could wiggle his ears an' pound on his head an' make a sound as if his head was hollow. We all thought he was very accomplished.

"My goodness. Am I borin' you with all my chatter - why I don't believe I've talked so much about the old days in an age. Does me good, you know and there aren't many folks left I can talk to nowadays. They just won't listen. Do 'em good if they did. They aren't many like you!"

"Oh! I love hearing about those old times Miss Ella. I'm going to come back again soon and hear more."

My impulsive offer to come back was a shade too enthusiastic. I hadn't waited to be asked. Miss Ella stiffened and with calm politeness murmured, "I'm sure I'm always glad to receive guests."

It was my dismissal and I had sense enough to know it, Miss Ella seemed to regret her voluble afternoon and I was bowed out with dispatch and a cool courteousness.